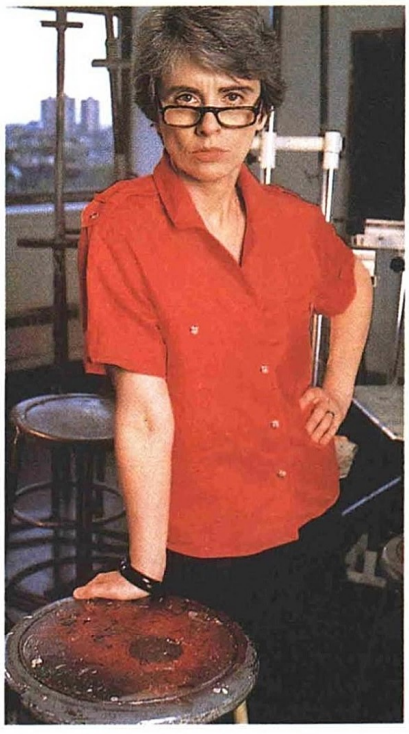
Camille Paglia—outspoken academic, author, and critic of popular culture—talks about feminism, religion, and sexual obsessions (the country's ...and her own).



A Scholar and a Not-So-Gentle Woman

Like her "idol," Madonna, she seems completely at ease, her true self, in the media spotlight. In the last few months, she has posed for the cover of *New York* magazine, shown off her debating skills in *Harper's*, been featured in *Rolling Stone*'s "hot" issue, and created a stir on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Not much, perhaps, by blonde-ambition standards—but Camille Paglia is no MTV goddess. She is a forty-four-year-old academic and, until recently, an obscure one at that. Even now, she continues to teach in the minor leagues, in the humanities department at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. "I'm totally outside the establishment," she says, "and that's wonderful. That's why I'm free to rock the boat. I'm attacked and assailed and reviled. And that's *wonderful*. I say, 'Go ahead, hit me with your best shot.' That's the price you pay for speaking out."

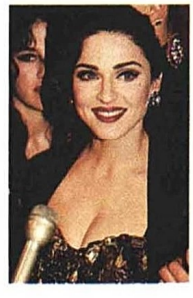
"Speaking out" is an uncharacteristically mild way of putting it. Paglia is a string of firecrackers tossed into a faculty tea party. She is the avenging angel of the sixties, come to wrest control of the ivory tower from the Frenchified intellectuals, doctrinaire feminists, and conference-hopping careerists who, she alleges, overran it during the last two decades. "Sixties people were defeated, but we wised up, and we're returning," she says. "It's the Blakean theory of innocence, experience, redeemed innocence in action." Paglia wants to sweep the campus clean of all "politically correct" certitudes and the "labyrinthine" mind games of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, the French theorists whose crack-the-code approach to literature and society (language is the only thing that exists, the author is irrelevant, a menu is as significant a "text" as *Moby Dick*, etc.) became all the rage in liberal-arts departments across America in the seventies.

Paglia's own school of thinking is hard to categorize. She is a devout believer in classical education and in academic standards and discipline, but she also revels in pop culture and believes that film and rock 'n' roll represent the peak of Western civilization in the twentieth century. "My own writing style is massively influenced by rock music," she says. "It goes wham, bam! My idol is Keith Richards." (She has more than one idol in the rock 'n' roll hall of fame.) She is also a feminist and proudly points out that she was named after Camilla, the Amazon heroine of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and yet much of what she writes and says is a slap in the face of organized feminism. ("Leaving sex to the feminists is like letting your dog vacation at the taxidermist," she recently opined.)

Paglia loudly declared her independence from the sisterhood of academic feminists with the publication last year of *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, her breathtaking (and sometimes exasperating) romp through Western culture. The book's central thesis—that men created culture as a defense against women's sexual and procreative powers—was not designed to get Paglia on Gloria Steinem's A-list. "Male aggression and lust are the energizing factors in culture," she wrote. "They are men's tools of survival in the pagan vastness of female nature. . . . If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts." As Paglia acknowledged in her preface, "My method is a form of sensationalism," and *Sexual Personae* has indeed scandalized the decorous world of academia.

Below, we present Camille Paglia in her own words.

ON MADONNA:



I love Madonna, because we're on parallel tracks. She's responding to the same tensions within the Italian Catholic Church as I am—the vestigial pagan elements of the church. My sense of eroticism was formed by the church. As a child, I saw such things as the nude Saint Sebastian wearing his little loincloth, in this sexy pose, with arrows in his body and blood dripping down. Today, all of

PHOTOGRAPH OF CAMILLE PAGLIA BY WYATT COUNTS/OUTLINE; MADONNA BY JOHN ROCA/LGI.

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that is gone, and it's terrible. The Catholic Church in America has tried to purge itself of immigrant traces.

In the past, the church appealed to the sensual. It aroused your eroticism. It was true to the sadomasochistic realities of life and nature, all the martyrdom of the saints, and the crucifixion and the blood. And Madonna has brought that out, without being quite conscious of what she is doing.

ON AIDS AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION:

As a sixties person, I'm drawn to those who burn fast and hot, who live life to the ultimate, who go against nature and all the rules. Who has contributed more to life? The gay men who are dying, those who sought love and beauty? Or the type of careful soul who never risks anything and lives to be eighty? I think gay men should be seen as romantics who were correct in pushing themselves to the ultimate. They pursued love and beauty, and they were slapped down. Has any group been more humiliated in the area of its greatness? The *two* biggest influences on me have been Italian Catholicism and gay men.

I have two close friends with AIDS. They used to go to the baths and do all that. I envied them. I tried free love, with men as well as with women. But for me, as a strong woman, I felt it was impossible. I could not pick up guys and retain my self-respect. There was a way men were able to do it, but as a woman, I could not, because I was letting someone else into my body. My gay friends would say, "Oh, it's the same thing we do." And I would tell them, "No, it's not. Having something going into your womb is just not the same thing as anal sex, because the womb is the center of life."

I no longer espouse free love because I see the disaster that happened when we tried it. I now realize that the full expansion of sexual freedom involves sanitation costs. I'm not saying that we always have to obey nature. In fact, we should defy nature. But nature may have its own master plan that has to do with the species, and we have to acknowledge the huge forces at work.

ON GERMAINE GREER AND SUSAN SONTAG:

The leading feminist theoreticians have a phobia about sex; these people who claim to be liberators actually are oppressors. Even Germaine Greer—what a sad turn she took. When she began, she stood for sexual freedom. All feminism would have been different if she had stayed on her original track. Susan Sontag was bisexual. These women provided a leadership role—two sophisticated, stylish, literate, sexy women. What happened to them? These women should have been monumental figures by the end of the century. But they just imploded!

I feel that it may be due to the fact that both women have problems with the father figure. Sontag (below) has always been plagued by the memory of the vanished father. She herself says that when she goes to a movie where the father is gone or missing, she starts weeping. And, of course, Greer wrote a whole book about the problems she had with her (distant and mysterious) father (*Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*). I think their careers collapsed in part because of the sentimentality these women felt for a man whose approval they desperately wanted. They are still mooning over a vanished father figure, whom they will never be able to confront fully.



I, on the other hand, come from a strong patriarchal background. Italian fathers are absolutely present, active, resolute, and so on. It's a culture of strong men, strong women. So, while I'm a total rebel against authority, I still have a sense of the stability of male authority that neither of these women had. I couldn't escape it: I had to confront it from the beginning. My (theoretical) system allows for the strength of men.

ON PORNOGRAPHY:

Michelangelo was a pornographer. Everything he did, including the great *Pietà*, the Virgin with the nude Christ in her lap, was pornography. If you don't respond to the sexuality in his work, you're not appreciating what he was doing. The only time people recognize something as porn is when it's bad art.

If you're a feminist theorist who says she can't deal with porn, then you're incompetent—get out. Because it is sexual reality, pornography is lust. At the same time, I feel that pornography should not push itself into all public areas. When someone comes out of a subway, they should not have to see ten naked women's bodies in full display at the newsstand.

The Madonna video was fabulous. I loved it. But I still felt it was bad for children to see, not because it would corrupt them but because it would jade them. Children should have difficulty getting their hands on something like that. It should be like, "Oh, Mommy and Daddy are gone; let's get it out of their closet!" Then if they see it, it's hot.

Nothing should ever be censored, not even violent porn. If you are for porn, you are for it all the way. How about snuff films, that big bugaboo of feminism? I'm dying to see one; where are they? Obviously, when we go to a mystery movie, we don't want to see an actual murder on the screen. The same thing with snuff films—we don't want to see a woman really being killed. But when I hear these feminists carrying on against snuff films, that makes me want to see one. If there's a taboo, I want to break it. Whenever I see a taboo arising, I think that the artist and the intellectual have the absolute obligation to shatter it. A truly avant-garde filmmaker today would make one of these films.



PHOTOGRAPH OF SUSAN SONTAG BY THOMAS VICTOR; PIETÀ BY ART RESOURCE.

ON DATE RAPE:

Dating is a very recent phenomenon in world history. Throughout history, women have been chaperoned. As late as 1964, when I began college, we had strict rules. We had to be in the dorm under lock and key by eleven o'clock. My generation was the one that broke these rules. We said, "We want freedom—no more double standard!" When I went to stay at a male friend's apartment in New York City, my aunts flew into a frenzy. "You can't do that, it's dangerous!" But I said, "No, we're not going to be like that anymore." Still, we understood in the sixties that we were taking a risk.

Today's young women want the freedoms that we won, but they don't want to acknowledge the risk. That's the problem. The minute you go out with a man, the minute you go to a bar for a drink, there is a risk. You have to accept the fact that part of the sizzle of sex comes from the danger of sex. You can be overpowered.

So it is a woman's personal responsibility to be aware of the dangers of the world. But young feminists today are deluded. They come from a protected, white, middle-class world, and they expect everything to be safe. Notice, it's not black or Hispanic women who are making a fuss about this—they come from cultures that are fully sexual, and they are fully realistic about sex. But these other women are sexually repressed girls, coming out of pampered homes, and when they arrive at these colleges and suddenly hit male lust, they go, "Oh, no!"

These girls say, "Well, I should be able to get drunk at a fraternity party and go upstairs to a guy's room without anything happening." And I say, "Oh, really? And when you drive your car to New York City, do you leave your keys on the hood?" My point is that if your car is stolen after you do something like that,

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yes, the police should pursue the thief, and he should be punished. But at the same time, the police—and I—have the right to say to you, "You stupid idiot, what the hell were you thinking?"

I mean, wake up to reality. This is male sex. Guess what—male sex is hot. There's an attraction between the sexes of which we're not totally in control. The idea that we can regulate it by passing campus grievance-committee rules is madness. My kind of feminism stresses personal responsibility. I've never been raped, but I've been very vigilant—I'm constantly reading the signals. If I ever got into a dating situation where I was overpowered and raped, I would say, "Oh, well, I misread the signals." But I don't think I would ever press charges.

ON ITALIAN PAGAN CATHOLICISM:

That's what I'm calling my new philosophy. It's founded on law and order, because you have to stop at the stoplights and all that. But at the same time, it allows for prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, all of that. There's a moment that I love at the end of *La Dolce Vita*: After the all-night party in the aristocrats' house, when it's morning and all the partygoers are exhausted, the matriarch appears and summons her children to mass at the family chapel. And so these decadent aristocrats, who have spent all night carousing, go off with their mother to church, while the rest of the partygoers are left staring with their mouths open.

See, Italian culture has somehow gotten it together. There's a deep feeling for the sacred, for tradition, for the family, for order—and at the same time, there's this wildness and sensuality. To me, that's life at its richest.

ON HER OWN SEX LIFE:

It's been a disaster, an absolute disaster, because I've never been able to connect with someone. On the one hand, I'm attracted to men, but I cannot give up my independent power as a woman to them—I cannot submit. On the other hand, lesbians loathe me. I'm very unhappy with the majority of people who call themselves lesbians today. I hear that in San Francisco, it's different—there are a lot of interesting lesbians. But my own experience of lesbian culture is that it's too familial, too emotionally claustrophobic.

We all must leave our mothers eventually. *Psycho*, one of the great films of our time, is about a man who couldn't make that break. He falls back into the mother, becomes her, and has to kill his own sexual impulse in order to remain her. The lesbian is not moving away from the mother at all—this is the horror I've discovered.

I've noticed that too many lesbians fall into this mommy-huggy-kissy thing. They call it lesbian bed death. There can be a marvelous ecstatic quality about sex between women, because you have a sense of going back. But after awhile, the sex is not as passionate as it is between men and women. I'm sorry, lesbians can say whatever they want, it's just not as hot. Because men and women are different species as far as I'm concerned, and crossing that boundary between the two is the sizzle of sexual passion.

So I've found out that the only women I can be with are straight. They seem to like me. I interact with straight women on the same level that they interact with men.

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ON THE AMERICAN PERSONALITY:

American personality, far from being trapped in decorum, is booming, pushy, manic, facilely optimistic. America is still a frontier country of wide-open spaces. Our closeness to nature is one reason why our problem is not repression but regression: Our notorious violence is the constant eruption of primitivism, of anarchic individualism.

The sixties attempted a return to nature that ended in disaster. The gentle nude bathing and playful sliding in the mud at Woodstock were a short-lived, Rousseauist dream. My generation, inspired by the Dionysian titanism of rock, attempted something more radical than anything since the French Revolution. We asked, Why should I obey this law? Why shouldn't I act on every sexual impulse? The result was a descent into barbarism. We painfully discovered that a just society cannot function if everyone does his own thing. And out of the pagan promiscuity of the sixties came AIDS. Everyone of my generation who preached free love is responsible for AIDS. The sixties revolution in America collapsed because of its own excesses. It followed and fulfilled its own inner historical pattern, a fall from romanticism into decadence. During the sixties, we made an epic journey to the heart of darkness and returned with tragic truths.

The American sixties already contained every revolutionary insight. We didn't need Derrida; we had Jimi Hendrix. In the blazing psychedelic guitar work of this genius, time, space, form, voice, person, were deconstructed. Floating Far Eastern suspensions released the categorizations of European mind. Hendrix's radical artistic statement, with its raw, elemental sound effects of earth, air, water, and fire, addressed both nature and culture and therefore dwarfed society-obsessed French thought. Psychedelia's deconstructions, unlike Derrida's, destroyed the safe and known for one purpose: expanded vision. The sixties saw the cosmos and were awed by it. The French, frolicking in their miniature stone gardens, haven't had a cosmic thought since Pascal.

ON FREUD, FEMINISM, AND WOMEN'S STUDIES:

Women's studies is institutionalized sexism. It must go. Women's studies is a comfy, chummy morass of unchallenged groupthink. It is, with rare exception, totally unscholarly. Academic feminists have silenced men and dissenting women. Our best women students are being force-fed an appalling diet of cant, drivel, and malarkey. Pioneering work in sex studies will come only from men and women conservatively trained in high-level intellectual history.

American feminism's nosedive began when Kate Millett declared Freud a sexist. Trying to build a sex theory without studying Freud, women have made nothing but mud pies. Freud is one of the major thinkers in world history. One reads him not for his conclusions, which were always tentative and in process, but for the bold play of his speculative intelligence. He shows you how to conceptualize, how to frame long, overarching arguments, how to verbalize ambiguous, nonverbal psychic phenomena. Reading him, you feel new tracks being cut in your brain. Cheap gibes about Freud, epidemic in women's studies, are symptoms of emotional juvenility. American feminists, sniveling about Freud without reading him, have sentenced themselves and their work to mediocrity and irrelevance.

Simone de Beauvoir's brilliant, imperious *The Second Sex*, now forty years old, is the only thing undergraduate sex studies needs. Add Freud to de Beauvoir and you have intellectual training at its best. Women's studies is a jumble of vulgarians, bunglers, whiners, French faddicts, apparatchiks, dough-faced party-liners, pie-in-the-sky utopians, and bullying, sanctimonious sermonizers. Reasonable, moderate feminists hang back and keep silent in the face of fascism. For fifteen years, the established women academics irresponsibly let women's studies spread uncritiqued and unchecked. Great women scholars like Jane Harrison and Gisela Richter were produced by the intellectual discipline of the masculine classical tradition, not by the wishy-washy sentimentalism of clingy, all-forgiving sisterhood from which no first-rate book has yet emerged. Every year, feminists provide more and more evidence for the old charge that women can neither think nor write.

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